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INFO AMEMBASSY ATHENS
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AMCONSUL CHENNAI
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AMCONSUL TORONTO
USEU BRUSSELS
USMISSION USUN NEW YORK
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HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI
DIA WASHINGTON DC
NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC
SECDEF WASHDC
CDRUSARPAC FT SHAFTER HI//APCW/APOP//
CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI//J3/J332/J52//

UNCLAS COLOMBO 000448

SENSITIVE

STATE FOR SCA (BOUCHER), SCA/INS AND PRM
STATE ALSO PASS USAID
AID/W FOR ANE/SCA, DCHA/FFP (DWORKEN, KSHEIN)
AID/W FOR DCHA/OFDA (MORRISP, ACONVERY, RTHAYER, RKERR)
ATHENS FOR PCARTER
BANGKOK FOR USAID/DCHA/OFDA (WBERGER)
KATHMANDU FOR USAID/DCHA/OFDA AND POL (SBERRY)
GENEVA FOR RMA (NKYLOH, NHILGERT, MPITOTTI)
USUN NEW YORK FOR ECOSOC (D MERCADO)
SECDEF FOR OSD - POLICY
PACOM ALSO FOR J-5

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: Northern Sri Lanka SitRep 57

REF: A) Colombo 435 B) Colombo 432 C) Colombo 425 D) Colombo 418
E) Colombo 414 F) Colombo 413 G) Colombo 412 H) Colombo 411 I)
Colombo 402 J) Colombo 401 K) Colombo 400 L) Colombo 396 M)
Colombo 393 and previous

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Events continued to move rapidly on April 21 in and around the No-Fire Zone (NFZ). Government forces reported splitting the NFZ in two, reaching the beach near Putumattalan. Civilian evacuees on April 20 totaled 35,000-40,000 according to Government statements, with an additional 25,000 escaping April 21. Exact civilian casualties are unknown, but some estimate 1,000 dead and 2,000 injured inside the NFZ since the morning of April 20. The Government gives no indication it will slow or stop this offensive, planning to control the northern half of the NFZ by day's end and then concentrate on the remaining portion between Putumattalan and Mullaitivu. Aid shipments into the NFZ are on hold until a new landing site can be established. LTTE forces continue to fire on civilians trying to escape the NFZ. Paragraph 17 contains suggested advocacy and press points. End summary.

ARMY COMMANDER'S SITUATION REPORT

12. (SBU) Ambassador spoke with Army Commander Fonseka late this morning local time. Fonseka estimated a total of 60,000 evacuees since the offensive began early April 20, including 25,000 today (much less than the figure of 80,000 given by UN and other SL military sources earlier on April 21). The General says an additional 2,000 have come out by sea. General Fonseka estimated 20-25,000 civilians remain inside the NFZ. (COMMENT: An alternative explanation for the discrepancy between the early April 21 reports of 80,000 evacuees and the 25,000 given by General Fonseka later in the day would be that the military is now adjusting the numbers of

escapees in accord with its earlier low estimates of how many civilians remained in the NFZ.)

13. (SBU) Ambassador asked how so many civilians were able to leave and if the LTTE were allowing them to do so. General Fonseka replied that the LTTE was in fact shooting at civilians attempting to depart, both on land and on sea, and using suicide bombers to prevent their departure. He said that the SLA is now right up to the LTTE lines, so that when the SLA opens a breach in the LTTE lines, the civilians are able to come out.

14. (SBU) General Fonseka (despite previous denials that the Sri Lanka forces had entered the No-Fire Zone) told us the SLA has split the NFZ in two, and predicted that the northern area would be cleared today. Ambassador, noting we had received reports of artillery use, stressed the crucial importance of avoiding civilian casualties and not using artillery and other indiscriminate weapons.

Fonseka said the LTTE is firing artillery and that the SLA has not used artillery in the last two days. He said the SLA is primarily using rifles and occasionally "infantry mortars" to fire at hardened LTTE positions when less than 50 meters away. He said the civilians were well behind these LTTE positions.

15. (SBU) General Fonseka said Prabhakaran was still in the NFZ as of April 20 but speculated that he will try to leave soon. He also stated "lots of LTTE cadres" are leaving with the genuine civilians, dressed in civilian clothes and without weapons.

16. (SBU) Ambassador urged General Fonseka to allow the UN to continue to deliver food and medicine, the ICRC to evacuate the wounded, and to allow pauses in fighting, including permitting a UN team to negotiate the release of the remaining civilians with the LTTE. Fonseka replied the humanitarian agencies were welcome to get food and medicine in and evacuate wounded civilians from the sea, but that the army could not agree to a cease-fire because the LTTE would only use it to regroup. He noted that if the ICRC does send a boat to evacuate wounded still trapped in the NFZ, it will have to find a new landing spot further south, since Putumattalan is now in SLA hands.

CONDITIONS IN NO-FIRE ZONE

17. (SBU) Post spoke directly with a source inside the NFZ on the morning of April 21. The source reported heavy shelling from the SLA earlier in the day, but said it had now stopped. He estimated civilian casualties in the NFZ since the most recent SLA offensive began on April 20 at 1,000 dead and 2,000 injured, although it is unclear if the source was able to get a solid sense of today's casualties. (Pro-LTTE sources are citing significantly higher numbers of killed and wounded civilians.) He also reported that a Government Agent inside the NFZ (note: a Sri Lankan official) estimated there are still 200,000 civilians inside the NFZ. (COMMENT: This number appears high to us; it is unclear whether this includes the 25,000 to 80,000 evacuees variously reported on April 21 alone. Regardless, the numbers who have already left clearly exceed the GSL's estimates of civilians remaining under LTTE control over the past several weeks - about 60,000.)

18. (SBU) The source believed that the GSL has used the lower estimates to reduce the amount of food going into the NFZ in order to increase the pressure on civilians to leave. He said the LTTE was trying to push civilians further south in the NFZ, and was still firing at civilians trying to escape north into the Government-controlled area. Source confirmed that the landing point for the food shipments and medical evacuations is now under Government control, and they are trying to locate a new landing site further south in the NFZ.

FOOD SHIPMENT/MEDICAL EVACUATION ON HOLD

19. (SBU) According to UN resident coordinator Neil Buhne, the planned shipment of about 1,000 metric tons of food scheduled to depart the evening of April 20 did not receive clearance (presumably because of heavy fighting in the Putumattalan area). The Putumattalan landing site is now in government control, where few

IDPs are now located. Buhne said that the UN was working with the government and the LTTE to agree on a new site further south in the NFZ for the ship to land. According to Buhne, a second ship would be sent to evacuate wounded.

STATUS OF UN TEAM ENTRY UNCLEAR

¶10. (SBU) Buhne told Ambassador he had spoken on April 21 to Foreign Minister Bogollagama and Presidential Chief of Staff Lalith Weeratunga concerning a response to his letter requesting permission for an initial advance UN team to enter the NFZ. Buhne reported that Bogollagama replied, "you will receive an official notification," without previewing the response. Weeratunga questioned whether a team was still needed. Buhne stressed that it was, but reported that the conversation soon turned into an unproductive discussion about how many IDPs remained in the zone. Buhne told us the UN was still checking its numbers, but would release them in a public statement over his name later today in an effort to increase pressure on the GSL to allow a UN mission.

ICRC REPORT ON WOUNDED

¶11. (SBU) The ICRC told Ambassador on April 21 that during the hostilities near Putumattalan hospital, the staff moved about 500 patients south to Vellimullivaikal, at the southern end of the safe zone. About 100 wounded patients were still at a second, smaller medical facility in Valayanmadam in the center of the safe zone. The ICRC stressed that it is extremely difficult to get accurate estimates of wounded waiting to be evacuated at present, but thought it could not be less than 1,000.

GOVERNMENT BRIEFS DIPLOMATS

¶12. (SBU) On the evening of April 20 Bogollagama, the Sri Lankan Air Force Commander and the Air Force Operations Director gave a briefing on the day's events to diplomatic representatives from the US, India, Japan, China, Russia, and the UK, and the UN Resident Coordinator. The officials stated 35,000 civilians came out toward the west from the NFZ near Putumattalan after SLA troops had come very close to the NFZ and breached an earthen berm put up by the LTTE. As of late on April 20, the Army had registered 23,000 of these civilians, with 12,000 waiting to be processed. Once processed, they would be bused to Kilinochchi, then to Omanthai and on to Vavuniya.

¶13. (SBU) During the day, another 5,000 civilians moved north within the NFZ and along the beach. Aerial reconnaissance video shown at the briefing appeared to show LTTE cadres shooting into the sand in front of a large number of civilians to prevent their advance. The civilians nevertheless continued northward out of the NFZ and are now in government-controlled territory, the GSL reported.

¶14. (SBU) The Foreign Minister stated that with the exit on April 20 of about 40,000 civilians and the 67,000 other civilians already out of the safe zone, approximately 107,000 civilians had left. He surmised that as of April 20 evening approximately 20,000 to 30,000 civilians remained in the safe zone. The UN Resident Representative responded that the number of civilians still inside the NFZ was very likely larger.

PLACEMENT OF NEW CIVILIAN EVACUEES

¶15. (SBU) UNHCR told USAID mission on April 21 that there were

about 5,000 IDPs at the former Omanthai crossing point, 12000 between Kilinochchi and Omanthai (reportedly moving on their own), and between 40000 between the conflict area and Kilinochchi. UNHCR estimated about 40000 more were poised to cross over to government lines, but all these latest figures from UNHCR are originating with the government. The government had allocated five new sites allocated for roughly 13000 IDPs. The GSL had told UNHCR on April 20 that it plans to empty more schools around Vavuniya to provide more room. ICRC told us it still has "quite a bit" of unused tent capacity. The GSL was confident it could handle the 40,000 new IDPs

from April 20 at the main Manik Farm site, with room for 2,500 additional persons in Zone I, 28,000-35,000 persons in Zone II with 7,000 tents, and 5,000 to 6,000 persons in Zone III. Water, sanitation and hygiene issues will be difficult to manage, however. UNHCR noted that supplies going in to the camp are still being stopped at the Medawachchiya checkpoint at times.

ICRC REPORTS ONGOING VISA PROBLEMS

¶16. (SBU) ICRC continues to have difficulties with visa applications to the Sri Lankan Government for their international staff. They have 13 pending requests for staff destined to work in the Vanni region. This includes 3 existing surgical team positions, and entry visas for 7 short support mission positions and for 3 long-term protection delegate positions. There have been 13 other visa requests denied by the Ministry of Defense. Separately, ICRC has an additional 12 pending visa request for staff going to other parts of the country.

SUGGESTED PUBLIC/PRIVATE ADVOCACY POINTS

¶17. (U) Post suggests the following themes to be stressed in both public and private discussions:

- Welcome the escape of tens of thousands of civilians from the conflict zone in northern Sri Lanka.
- Remain deeply concerned about the large number of civilians who are still caught in the conflict area.
- Condemn efforts by the Tamil Tigers to prevent civilians from leaving and urge them to allow freedom of movement to all civilians.
- Ensuring the safety and security of those civilians who remain in the conflict area and respecting international humanitarian law must be the foremost priority of both the Government of Sri Lanka and the Tamil Tigers.
- To prevent further casualties, both sides must refrain from indiscriminate fire and using heavy weapons.
- Fully support the UN Secretary-General's call for UN staff to be allowed into the conflict zone to facilitate relief.
- Urge the Sri Lanka Government to pursue diplomacy to permit a peaceful outcome of this standoff in the "no fire zone."
- GSL should allow UN/ICRC access to all sites where IDPs are being registered and sheltered to ensure maximum transparency.

BLAKE